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*The
African
Boy*

E. N. SARGENT

*The
African
Boy*

*The Macmillan Company, New York
Collier-Macmillan Limited, London*



A section of this book, under the title "Santos: Tempo Rumba," first appeared in *The New Yorker*.

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Designed by Andrew Roberts

*If a man does not keep pace with his
companions, perhaps . . . he hears a different
drummer. Let him step to the music
which he hears however measured or far away. . . .*

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

African Boy

give me my first soul, find the clay for my body

give my second soul,

shape the form in which I am to appear

give then my third soul, the great one

let me feel danger

and let me return

When I have been ransomed at slave=sell

When I have made sixteen voyages under ground

When I have become a shadow

when I have gone into a tree

give me my fourth soul

Sékpólí

sépkólí

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*The
African
Boy*

Part I

Ā K B Ā L Ā ' S S O N G
or The Joining-of-Ways

From a legend of Dahomey

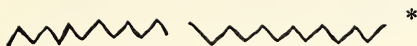
A strong-minded girl will make every effort to support the pain of the full series of ritual cuts . . . whose purpose is erotic and aesthetic enhancement . . . at one sitting. The fiancé or lover of such a girl is exceedingly proud of her bravery. . . ."

MELVILLE J. HERSKOVITS

The Dahomey, Vol. I

I think of the West African woman——

D. H. LAWRENCE



Bring me the sword death carries, the knife that lives in the eyes
The pain that enters the sight, the blade that lives in the rains
I thought about you all night, my eyes wept red stains
The knife went deep where the old cuts were; no cries
Disgraced you, my brother, whose old cut is greatest of all.

The long grass waits for us, softly uncut,
Bending like green fire in the eye of the rains
How good it would be to lie down under these green skies
O! the knife went deep all the same
I shall never let you forget the place of seeing
Or the tears of blood that rise at your touch and fall

Nor will I forget you, my brother, whose old cut is greatest of all.



The cut of rain-wet straw, the longest cut, so that you will abandon
yourself to my long hair

Above the mark of those who eat the night
Above the sign of those who drum the roads
And the head=word
Slanting
aching

As when you talk to me the lightest talk, your playful voice draws me
in its snare

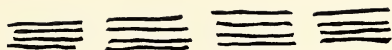
These cuts become livid and pulse like the heart
And there is nothing you need be told
I have bled words
Silently
straitly

You can see above ghosts and ancestors the deep-cut swelling
of my exposed desire

Where the shy brain joins love's second sight
Eyes and mind humble to a double goad
Your dread words
Granting
taking

Let me entangle you forever in the rain of my hair, in the lines of
my transfigured hair

I already know the knife's burning art
I already know the power you hold
Over my cuts
Violent
fateful



I need these ornaments to move you, my lover
The face has masks but I show reckless lines
When I leave you to return to my house

And you, going your way, look back at me
You see these extreme patterns; strong
As the knife itself they drive your sated heart

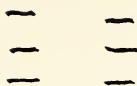
Forward over the sinuous third vertebra of my spine
Old wounds are in flower more than the others wear,
Do not call me vain for each flayed opening

More than is usual costs unusual pain
Or in a dry season may drain the soul-shape
Leaving only formless dust of beginnings

Be glad I seek the strength to make your Being turn
No dancer moves to an unmoved drummer; let the drum fall
I need these wounds to move you, my brother,
whose old wound is gravest of all



You seek a rock=deep source in fury of water
The face of maelstrom ways yielding as mine
Among shattered parts a known, simple design,
Seek there on the left cheek white at partings
But dark now once more with memory
Like the parakeet feather, like the sea-lily
A mark no larger than the tip of the index finger
A cut no smaller than the whole of farewell
The ragged, round circle will not be still
It is here that a man kisses a girl
He sucks with his mouth, seeking, and cries, "Seek
Me, red circle, drop within whirling drink."



Neck good to touch
Stays in the hut
Stiff as a bird

 flying away
 over a gray
 oracle tray

Neck good to grip
Slides in the shade
Marked like a snake

 twisting a note
 high at the throat
 passion has caught

Note of The Boa
One note over
The note heard

 coiling the nest
 crushing the breast
 rising possessed

Chord on echo
Forward the bright
Unbearable flight

 over the neck
 where a caress
 shivers to rest



I can undergo additional pain now
I will not wait another year for my full beauty
I will not delay the bringer of my full strength
The god of iron will not let evil result from these cuts
I have offered food to Fate's Trickster, the first guide
And he has eaten the seed within the seed
(Half for him and half for my watching lover)
They have given me money to heal earlier wounds,
An adept, the expert of many paths will work on me
I am not afraid yet
Forward! the knife is freedom as well as love;

Presence of my lover, friends, and of my kin
You challenge me I seek the enduring honor
Of one who will not leave a thing half-done
Whether it be pattern or freedom or self
Go on with the knife, go on with the festival
I celebrate, and I am the celebration
I choose and I am the choice and I am the one;

A staff points downwards to the base of my spine
Of all possible patterns I choose this mark
My lover lights a fire with his slow, warm pressing
He kindles the place with his hands
The place is called pass=over *
Because in play he passes his hands over it—
Go away old people, I choose my lover
I choose his male beauty, I choose the sword;
I choose the staff with the sharpened head.

* *glimž*: literally, pass=over.

My own hidden staff draws him up
Do you think I am a pit of ghosts, a hole?
Alertness and conscious form be the price of freedom
Not the voice which says "later—tonight"
Take the hand which caresses now
The friend of the inward staff
Point upwards from darkness, bury the carcass of lies
Cut, if you like, the hill of small pleasure
But let the creature come to know itself

For a living, feeling thrust of stem well-rooted
For a sentient flower on a long stem
For an upward leap from grasslands as the lightning
Gather your strength from the red inward dance
For a point of flesh meeting a point of flesh
Meet here and we shall meet forever again
As when the drum begins over and over
The single pass called Joining-of-Ways
Even under ground we shall meet,
Make war against the shallow unburied death
The dry death, the death by wind=voices;
As in a green grove after hurricane the burned boughs
show tender buds at will
Distilling even from salt spray a marvelous sweet liquor in deep still
Or as wan morning winds these most vulnerable buds
with leaf of faintest rose
Or as one road begins to resemble another and is ever so faintly all roads

As the water-bearer prints his heel on all dust
and at once bites all luscious, reddening plants

African Boy

Move forward in my joys and tap the beat of my laments

Distil the sweetness at the core of being

As you distil the heart of the growing yam

(only the knife knows the heart of the yam)

Until the time of great deeds, of art and of feasting

Lift swords!

our infinitesimal liquid=flashing essence

Patterns the living skin of the world

DRUM

eighty-one times on the inside of each thigh

nine rows of nine horizontal cuts of push me *

if I tire now hold me down show no mercy

if I cower wish me

covered with coldness cease now and I shall

never hold a man's love bold master

fearless of blood these terrible marks remain

forever to scourge the coward

out from the soft love=flesh from the tender

inner fold of iridescent, incised thighs

I want all things at once first ecstatic flesh

with its tall deep freedom

never mind the cost if it means melting

down every brass bracelet

cherish the rebel voice I want to make

love and guard these joyful patterns

the living water of love starts all beautiful free seeds

and grows all human intuitions—those sweet

plants with their idea=flowers

* "zido" cuts: literally, "push me."

DRUM

the living water of lovers of fighters against
chains of free pattern-makers
push me into the fire if I dance to any other
beat he who has the drum is master
And this day makes the drummer mine he shares
the heat of the knife he knows how the cuts burn
he offers his chest, his arms and the cups of his knees
in sharing
he laughs when the others try to drive him away
he speaks sex=words into the cuts;
jokes! stories of the baboon's ass, and
of how the elephant—
no one loves pain for its own sake!
ah the cuts are made to excite, they
are made for the fingers of fishermen
and for hunters' thighs
whose great staff rises to meet my
womb=hook, *Zeuzo* * held within but always held high
hold me, friends, that I may hold my brother
hard for the sword that releases from bondage
hard for the knife that releases patterns
behold!
I open my eyes and
he of the house=roof of the forest path and of the boat
he has brought gifts
many=patterned cloths
each more richly dyed
(as the knife knows) than the one before.

* *Zeuzo*: a hooked staff, sign of nobility among the Dahomeans.



In the mysterious dawn under house=roof, or white twilight
I mix a pale liquid awakening from water as milk,
My hour-glass left hand stirs in the calabash,
I will give my beloved, who comes as a visitor, a love=sign
Despite mother and father, despite curious children,
sweet secrecy clouds between
As I stir

Akasa * and sugar
Whiten my hand, hourglass patterns blanch, he has seen
How I remember uncovered, serene long-singing times
And though we may not embrace at the moment, he feels the past
He bends down and kisses the cuts of my left hand now soft as silk
In the presence of all, I give him sweetened drink; mildly; with the right.

* *akasa*: a white herbal essence.



When I was a small woman enlarging the lips of my sex, they gave me
a dancing-wand

And told me the story of Ākbala the strong girl
Who saw with eyes of desire the "chameleon's mate"
In the cult house
praying
chastely

The Chosen One tried to drive her away: I am pledged to the god
of this house for eight years and

Joining of flesh is a sin in sacred places!
But she seduced him, enticing him with songs,
So he lay down
obeying her
fatefully

While they mingled, the jealous god grasped the boy by the neck and he died;
Ākbāla, though, would not be driven from his body,
She defied the angry priests: He will awaken,
Here I stay
today
and
always

Then they built a great fire of bitter leaves and placed the empty boy upon it
Pouring palm oil over him to burn away her love;
The spirit of the boy watched from a tree how his body
Turned ashy gray
painfully,
hatefully

If I do not enter the fire with him I shall live in loathing of myself,
said Ākbālā;

She began to sing, and when she had finished her song
She threw herself into the flames. O

Fear-full parts
belly and heart
be brave

Remember the beautiful vodu boy and the strong girl who loved him
even in the fire

Remember how they walked forth hand in hand
Unharm'd, their bodies moving in harmony
Remember that
when you faint
or fail

Remember how the villagers danced, and how the King ordered them to
gather and hear his command:
"I, Metonifi, the first King of all the world, I who rule the gods,
destiny, the animals and man,
I tell you, every child, even one called by a god to the cult house,
must be allowed to play with women and see the sun—"

Dance, my heart, to Ākbālā

her story has power,
If you break the rule it changes; this pattern has power;
Therefore knife, upon my belly blaze the chameleon
Subtler than the leopard, swifter than the crocodile, one
mutable way
daring
and
graceful



I need your deep cut to move me, my lover
No ornament would ever turn these limbs
Quick to your fancy passing and repassing
Over the same ground unashamedly
You cease to be ashamed of your love=hurt
Lost, buried in sand there will be songs
You least expect of prophecy and desire
To follow the burden of the drum you bear

Instinct and intellect are and do the same
As lovers' fluids they rouse the core and shape
With living flow each uninformed beginning
They wake the sleeping drum, the dancers call,
And I —

I need your dangerous wound my brother,
Your grave ordeal, your ancient burn and scald,
I need your loss, your cised song to move me,
whose burden is greatest of all.



Africa, with the sun spread out on her breast, pride
Of many ornaments; arms, forehead, perpendicular lines between the eyes
On temple, on the cheeks, on the neck
On the chest, at the back of the neck, at the base of the spine
On the lower abdomen and finally on the thighs!

I praise these variations

Both in the number of cuts given at any one time and the order in which
designs are placed upon the body,

Africa, with her limbs stretched to the sun

And her Children of the Hunter, who-are-poor-people—

“We have come

If it is well you shall see

If it is not well you shall see”

Mother who will not let them forget the place of seeing

Within the mask sing who has sent her child to deliver me.

I feared to be carried off by the dark, out of mind,
My whole life borne apart as or in a dream farther and farther
Then desperate farthest; but not by death;
Not death does this nor madness nor crossing water, nor the gods
with their signs
But separate ways within too low or too high
For one nature;
I feared my own person, with its sexual powers, its reckless
leaping — forward! and the patterned
marks of experience on its soul=shape;
Captured, each one chained, hungering and alone,
These separate selves were slaves to an impure master;
We have come
If it is well you shall see
If it is not well you shall see
Song limned in the dark to hold back fear
Join us, silver-eyed, who are blindly gathered here.

He who partakes of all offerings but who is not a god
He who feeds the children of the serpent and the bird=children living
in-a-hole, and the pig=
Children-stubborn-people; those of the word which causes laughter
—and those of the river of blood
Also people of the route of the sun, and children=iron=within;
And also swamp waders;
He who keeps the leopard, the crocodile and the boa and the dog,
Who leaps with the chameleon but who is not he:
 We have come
 If it is well you shall see
 If it is not well you shall see
Let him come forth at last to the place of seeing
The naked stranger with his male beauty

Men of force, impotent men of impure fancies haughty
Givers of bad counsel, you wanted me pale and helpless to serve your ends
You offered me brass bracelets to deny my sex, and I listened
Ashamed of my leaping fancies of man and mask
Among the impotent nations —
How the wheat-field is gold=dark like a strong man
And how the strong lover is like the rippling wheat
 We have come
 If it is well you shall see
 If it is not well you shall see
Daily bread to the children of prophecy and desire!
Towards the end self blossoms into self,
 flowing into ether and fire.

Part II

IN THE BOAT

Chants from the Yoruba

“We bring sweet honey”

Fisherman’s song, Traditional

I

Unwinder of free
Tidal journey
Glider to sea
By sea-lily
I will not be
Tied to a tree
They buy the body
For five brass bracelets

Strike with your ranging iron axe
Eight dancers bending down in their tracks
Eight dancers upright as lances
Shaking their iron bells like chances
And two other secret ones in trances
With blood and ashes on their backs;
Loose the possessed ones lying in stacks,
The true secret is the awakening!

They take the dream-soul
And break his double
A slave's children
Remain slaves
No day is as sweet
As the day a tree falls
Speak with your hand
Inside me

They cut the sex of maiden kind
They make a cannibal of the bride
They show where the young man is tied
With no lover to hear his cry,
The maiden must pierce her lips or die,
She might tell dangerous secrets, I
Speak to you, knower of grass
Rower in the race

bringer of sweet honey.

On each side the gold=green land moves filled with endless desire
 A sparkle of creatures undimmed by day and unquenched by night
 Who with their kernels, like palm nuts, of ceaselessly sharpening life
 Turn to each other though linked and murmur and clasp and bite
 With a splendor of spending the boatman, under no roof, takes for a Sign
 Witness of fate, his orbit averting the long envious tide
 If we could know thee in full we might safely bathe in thy smile
 And the seeing into all creatures that is thine eye,
 Sign burned into the riverside tree on the right side
 Letters buried in bark at the recurring mysterious site
 Forgotten script of termite and the larger poets who work in the light
 Birds, rodents, antler-shedders and man two-legged with his pouch of fire
 Who told him how to strike flint subtly and take fire to wife
 Man, intent on his artful, individual, unconsidering design
 Man is there and the hunter hunts him with a great silent cry.

Not but there is something fitting about all this:
 Who can string the frog's beads about his child's wrist
 Or pull the thread of a spider to mend his wind
 Or bandage his head with bees, or tie his tongue with nits?
 You cannot avoid the everlasting, inward-breathing kiss
 Or fail to return outward if you do not wish to be killed.
 The young man never hears the death of his pointed stick
 The young woman never hears the death of her woven shift.
 Who looks at beauty and does not see it will never be skilled
 Who looks at beauty and will not see it loses his wits
 Who looks at beauty and cannot see it will soon be kissed.
 The gold-tipped arrow of beauty is often shot to miss.
 The patterned green beads of beauty are often loosely pinned.
 The infinite winding beauty may turn on the arm and hiss,
 Who looks at beauty and sees may heal the claw-fingered sick;
 Ecstatic bended river-arm,* open your living gift!

* Root of sound, vocalized breath of one swinging an axe.

IV

Honey was the first measure of when you knelt
 Voiceless as a bent fledgling before a snake
 Will-less as the furry place hawk delves
How much honey do you carry over the waves

Summer in a gourd, treasure in store I brought
 Coming at a word to spend the hoarded pay
 Comb-sweet honey, the share of times lost
 All the honey I could carry out of the grave
 All the honey I, the soft unborn
 Could carry away in unimagined hands

And then you felt how choosing shape began
 And sang

*You winds,
 Carry me along!*

Honey of the first, formless, desiring choice
 Uttered in the fast flow of a rising stream
 How shall we sing the darkly clouded joy?
 How much honey to win the mouth of the sea?

Boatman's song: "You winds, Carry me along."

V

Hunters and fishermen sing of the plants and animals
They find on their lonely walks or at night gatherings;
They sing the earth=sound green-gold and sexual,
The E sound on the drum and in language:
The red feathers are the pride of the parakeet
The white flowers are the pride of the green leaves
Two tiny birds jump over two hundred trees *
Our mascot delights women and the barren seas
He is strong and patient, he does everything to please,
He leads the male to the female when floods recede;
A great staff guides the bee on his aching track
A green staff guides the flesh on his pilgrimage
A belled staff guards the self on his fatherings,
He knows where the enemy mates and where he feeds,
He keeps the keel of the boat deep in the stream,
He has songs for the deceived and herbs for those who bleed,
He can understand the crocodile's cold shadow.

* Riddle—(the eyes).

VI

Lullaby, lullaby
Watcher over my child
Who knows the crocodile
Hungry, gray-eyed

Armored crocodile
Hating the unseined stars
Where the great snake
Ripples endlessly

The sky is immense, crocodile
Jealous of warm blood
Yours is not the only law
“deliver the truth and die”

We have seen the Sea=lily
Riding with her red bud
To keep the cold crocodile
From gnawing down the sky.

VII

You winding shape
Of rivers ocean bound
Nakedness of waves
Flowing into sound=
Shape of floating flower,
Help me to escape
Crocodile power,
Ride the planet's back
With staff and song
—*You winds of space*

Carry me along

Climb the sky rack
Seek The Boa

Call him poet
Who is born in a boat
By sixteen oil lamps

VIII

Lover of wildness, remember the youth who went into the leopard's lair
 When your desire journeys up the ocean-river to an unimagined shore;
 The leopard's eyeballs burn without sense, his cave is a rank house of fear
 The tail of the leopard is never at rest, birds and rabbits are not in his stews
 Power and pride are his claws—the hidden ones—men fear him everywhere
 When the drums awaken him people cover their ears and close their doors
 Nobody goes outside, the leopard's wild friends would eat them alive,
 They glower, with shrieks of a fury not hunger they tear their shameful food;
 Yes, I know the leopard, but a strong lover may touch the leopard
and live
 I am of the race who of old threw away their dead-stroking wooden oars
 Of those who used their live hands for paddles, I am of the
*Unexpected People
 Whose Queen, **Sungbo made a great voyage northward seeking her
clews,
 I am of the singing people who built the great wall of Ilē-Ifē I am heir,
 I am owner of four thousand six hundred and ninety six oracle
poems of Ōdū ***
 When I know the tone, my iron-blooded flesh-hooded song may stroke
the untamed air
 Covering its wildness with caresses until the whole creature trembles
like a soft, spotted ear.

* *Yorūba*: literally translated.

** "*Sūngbō*": the Queen of Sheba.

*** *Ōdū*: verb, "you exert."

I X

spirits of the east
spirits of the west
spirits of the sea
spirits of the north

You come from Ilē-Ifē, land of love;
as you do there so do here; if in truth
you come from the land of heroes
tell the secrets of this man's heart

This man's heart feels change, he becomes
soft as the unborn; he chooses his second shape;
he has two names; as they do in Ilē-Ifē,
land of song, so do here

he is driven forth
knives cut him free
how much honey
will you carry to the feast?

X

With his staff between my breasts
With his great staff between my fingers
With his mild guiding staff sharpened
 and his eyes sparkling like fire,
With the green beads of infinity
 wound about his left wrist;

Hunter of secrets
Mender of nets mender of heads
 mender of the mating of plants and animals
Driver of the first desiring choice
Watcher over my child;

Glider to sea by sea=lily
 Lover of wildness but not of the leopard
 save his soft, spotted ear

Owner of the knife
Sharer of the feast

Our boat is frail
I feel the underswell
My honey=offering trembles in the hold
The waves of time beat against the gunwales!

XI

Call them heroes who go forward without ceasing
Call him poet who goes forth to return
Call him a sacred king of Ilē-Ifē
Who passes through famine and the cities of death
Call him poet who rejoices in the staff
Who rejoices in the race to deliver sweet honey;
 You know the cold eye of the crocodile
 You know the warm red of the sea=lily
 You feel the outward-pouring, sinuous current
 Bringing you and taking you away
 Shaken, do not call The Unshaken Tone
 On open water or beneath low leaves
 ‘Offspring of The Boa wearing-the-crown,
 Changeless-in-changing-tide, Untiring One—’
 Let flow sweet freedom, terrible to slaves!

How much honey do you carry over the waves?

XII

We do not sing a mourning song without death
We do not sing a boating song under house=roof
Or a racing song without honey

We do not call on the one who is nameless
There are no praise-names for the unknown one
We bring a calabash of sweet honey

It is sacrilegious to sing when feelings have not been aroused
It is death to sing without the tone of the heart
Such song is the spoiling of a secret

Let me not sing the spoiling of a secret
Let them not say I kept death under my cloth
As the gods arrive, unexpectedly, let me sing

Joy to the hunter and boatman, joy to the guide
Joy to the Staff which brings me this far
Joy to the voyage, joy to the streaming waters

Winds, you winds carry me along
With golden-streaming honey, sweet-to-worship.

Part III

AWAKENING OF A DRUM

*In the ceremony of awakening a drum,
there will be the refrain 'I am
learning, Let me succeed' or alternatively
'I am listening, Let me understand' . . .*

“VOICES OF GHANA”

The great human serpent over everything——

WILLIAM JAMES

Let there be an awakening!

—Some say a man and a woman descended from the sky

They held hands

(the dead hold hands while crossing rivers)

They passed through the four magically protected entrances

They passed over the mountain that separates the two worlds

—Take away the songs sung in your honor but not the voice of the singer

Take the drum rhythms but not the drummer!

—The dancer throws his body from side to side

—Now at last there is time

to tell the resilient life

of sacred things

—Some say everything that happens has already happened in the sky

These do not wear masks, do not pierce their ears

(what is said will not go inside one ear and out the other)

They do not cicatrize their bodies, saying, man cannot improve

upon the creation of the gods

They do not celebrate the earth; their vodu is a shining mirror

called Dark=Bright

But these allow human sacrifice . . .

—Some say in the beginning was a sacred cage=

Dwelling for patterned serpent-life

(if the center is alert no harm can come)

I am listening

Let me understand

We know a gigantic tree in the depths of a vast forest
A great snake hanging down, reaching and reaching
Down to the center of the earth, always downward
When it touches the earth it is long enough and strong enough
to reach the sky

—Protect us as you protected the first woman and man
Against ourselves, against each other
against human sacrifice

Against what will not let a thing be born
Against “we do not know what we do not wish to know”

—Ever since the manifold creator created things
The drummer is treated gently and kindly
(he drums so that he may get something to eat)

I am learning
Let me succeed

—Wisdom and earth=joy, twisted iron and a bell
You who opened a man's and a woman's eyes (for we were born blind)
If you are gods speak now and defend yourselves
Or you will be disemboweled, roasted and eaten
What may be called the serpent, what may be called children of the serpent
Born with royal patterns of nerve-cells
Full of serpent=life prophetic craft and skill

Awaken!

—Deep in the bush deep in the inmost tree
All things flexible, sinuous and moist
Are
All things that fold and refold and do not move on feet
though sometimes they go through the air
The rainbow has these qualities plant=roots the umbilical cord
And the life of man, the one who is asked to explain;

Listen to the drummer:

If the gods are called they come; in whatever tone they are called
they come, but larger
Therefore wisdom says it is better to make masks
Ritual and form and memory
The things the gods love in man
the dangerous and disproportionate gods
For himself man has the unseen serpent=life

I am listening
Let me understand

Drums and shadows tell us where we are
 where we have been
 and where we shall be

In the vast forest that opens like a fan
 with many ribs

Or a cage of sacred staves

One of our members bears the unbearable

Feels on his cheek the forbidden insult

And we who drum feel with him

His mark appears upon us with its pain

We rise as one spirit

 brothers

 whatever our vodun

Come

Running-at-once from horned Togoland to the worm of Whydah

From Ghana's Ēwē hills and perhaps even farther (who knows

 how far they come)

straight-as-a-spear

running-mad-through-the-villages-until-insult-is-avenged

Nothing stops them they set fire on fire

No chief or chief's wife remains no palace or temple

 The sacred cage is carried aloft

 Poets, singers dancers all run mad

 The living drum and the dead answer

 They drum and the living reply

 Heroes awaken single perilous exploits

 Act without ancestors or procession

 (if-the-center-is-alert-no-harm-can-come)

 Inside the cage the serpent=life moves

 Far away a pale shadow comes

 Through hills and waters moving to my drum

 Echoing my beat with a pulse small as grass

 Listen to the white shadow:

In the long night of awakening my eyes began to be wet with tears

We answer, Fire eats grass until it comes to a fast runner

I ask, why was I given a green life?

No need to fear

You will only be as many others are

And if the breast shrivels and the babe hides his face

Hides his face in his hands like an old man

No need to fear

You will only be as others are

And if I watch him die, if he shrivels in my arms like a leaf—leaf of my
bough

If we lie down on the earth and the earth withers

If men come with seed and there is no longer lust for planting

And then if we eat the seed—how shall I make them see it?

No need to fear

You will only be as many others are

Now I must make them see him, now or never again

Our little brother withered, his blood fouled with hunger,

no moisture for his tears

His mother with her stretched grin of grief beyond grief

Look! they are there and we are here, eating,

All must die; those two will die sooner but we shall die forever

if we do not see them

No need to fear

You will only be as others are

What if the war comes and we go as they go
Alone to the festival, alone yet not alone
But with a babe at breast and unspeakable death drifting down,
The green greyed from our land, the thousand-year delights of
craft and skill
Gone in an instant—what of the dry river-bed we shall know
And the stone upon stone the fire upon ashen fire?

*No need to fear
You will only be as others are*

My cord is buried under a secret tree
If a figure is carved from the wood am I that figure?
If a mask is fashioned from the bark am I that mask?
My tree is a sanctuary for serpent=life
The snake likes to be there with a long reaching
With a long touching, until it is time, of every thing

What if they take my cord
What if they take my tree
What if they take my reaching?

*No need to fear
You will only be as many others are*

Listen:

*The serpent goes free where there is water
Needs mingling of male and female fluids
Needs the living water of voyages
In silent mornings*

I am learning
Let me succeed

The serpent's sign is an ear like an eye

Double flower open to the word and the tone=

Color I have a daughter

She is a white lily, a white rose, cyclamen white=

Blooming in the time of great snows, at a sunny window

Let her not wait for a lover drunk with carnage

Let her not wait for a soldier back from the wars

who smells of death in the morning doorway

Changed by the western star, she was formed of disasters overcome

Caress this lovely head of Europe lifted by the breathing wind
and planted here

Give her milk and sweet water, and a supple, knowing body

Give her the African heaven of dancing ghosts,

of palm trees and yams

of the long, warm evening sun

Talk to her from Madagascar

Serpent=wise through the jungle

sing to her

From the Ēwē mountain that separates the two worlds

Snake=wise

rainbow=wise

along the ocean=river

Your tone comes in the blood

hold her as a friend

The shape of your tone is liveness intertwined

I am listening

Let me understand

Enfold her once or infinite twice

Before you coil away to touch the Indian strand . . .

I know a small room in a vast city
Deep in a maze of tangled, living stone
The serpent is there with a strong reaching
Downwards, ever down to the center of the stone
Touching the life of man gone
 far to the last darkness

Flowers grow there darker than last years
The red gone purple, the purple gone to black
By some subterranean stream
I am only a leaf of grass
Come to dip in your waters alone
And not with secret strength or hidden friends
 wan in your darkness

From the pass that separates the two worlds
From the joining of ways
Even from the boat I have come
Do not be afraid I have not come to drink
I have not come to take
I am only a leaf of grass
 dipping in the stream

Of the great snake
Who ripples and reaches and tenses
Touching the center of the earth and the bright-dark sky
Who ripples and reaches

*—I thought I heard the voice of a white woman
Singing our songs beside an Ēwē stream
I thought I heard the tone of the white woman
Across the mountain that separates the two worlds
Let her look upon the farthest eyes of darkness . . .*

I am only a single blade of grass dipping,
dipping in the stream

Do not be angry, I have not come to drink
I have not come to take but only to wash
To lave myself in living rippling waters
To freshen to strengthen to redden my pale root

I went to read my poems in the Capitol
There were vultures circling over the Library of Congress,
The fountains with their green dolphins and humans
were drained dry that day
An oriental prince drew a crowd in the domed marble hall
with its turquoise and scarlet
and carnelian

There were no new words in my poems;

High in the mosaicked dome Dante Shakespeare and others
appeared letters of gold

I went down to the cellar and read in a sound-proof room
The lines I had written they choked me; I thought I heard a drum
shadow of darkness
Calling across the hills and the many waters; I thought
of my self

And how I, a woman, was reading poems into those crypts
to hold so long as the capitol stands,

There were no new words in my poems;

Where is a word touching woman-and-man
How do you tell the live touch=root with ever-changing flowers?
We have a way of saying wound and a way of wounding
If we could speak the opposite we might know our next knowledge
that dark dimension of greatness
sensed, sometimes, at the end
of a life=time or at nightfall

There were no new words in my poems;

What is the opposite of a wound? I asked myself that,
The tears flowed over my cheeks against a blow
I thought what is the word . . . closer and closer . . .
I thought I heard a drum
From a land where the women, even without bread, are poets
I thought I heard of soul=health woman-and-man

There were no new words in my poems;

We went up to a high chamber overlooking the green
Trees, roofs of the town all verdigris in the white spring light
yet golden with approaching summer
From a wide balcony I could view the blanched limestone
and marble splendor
My tears ran down over the dry water-sculpture and the many tombs
There was no new word in my poems;

An ancient silence held me chain of a word
held back too long in a dry throat

My freedom was too new, my fancy leapt half-formed
and disproportionate

The serpent fed from my hand from behind bars
his head came through

I feared those ambiguous fangs (drawn or withdrawn?)
where death may yet take all

There was no true word in my poems

The world is a spacious place yet how narrow is our room

—I would not call the great goddess
whose hand is as large as the dark
side of the world

I would not call upon her son and mate

The wise do not call upon the gods
—Shadow of darkness I am calling, calling

Far away
borne on by streams of ocean

The African Boy came
He wore no glass beads, cowrie shells or gold

Sent forth from his mother, who knows the lost truth of the night
With many sayings and many a vodu
To give him power over the blind, who must have something to touch

The forest people carved an image of him, but not frightful like a god
They made him human, of soft brown wood of the Serpent's Tree
And then, because he was afraid, they limned his eyes with silver
so that he might see into all
and be seen by all
who fear the dark

Human they made him and human they made his mother with her
heavy bracelets and her large limbs
scarred from the birth-hut how many hands
have clawed her frenziedly?

He mourned his dark mother on the alien shore;
She too has silver eyes to reflect firelit festivals
but her face is charred
how many times has she gone with bare-breasted terror
through deserted streets?

In a pale land cold among the unseeing
I saw the figure of a boy stand up for sale
Carved form motionless on a block,
Brave knees of a four-year-old he was like my son
And that look of knowing a task for the first time.
People of the forest, what is the errand you sent him on,
the young hunter?

Why did the African Boy cross the water?

Ah you have made him well with his vulnerable loins and his
clenched fists from which the staff was torn
Sign of nobility he might not carry among strangers
You made him well
But there are nails in his hands where the staff was, and
the mark of tears on his cheeks
Old tears child's tears run over and over and down;
Shadows of the forest, you taught him well—the game finds the hunter!
But why did you send him naked across the water?

—*There is a bird who when she soars her daughter does not grieve*
There is a bird who when she sings her son does not die
Perhaps he has come to hunt that bird
Or perhaps he has only come to change and grow
To strengthen to freshen to redden his dark root
Throw off your old slavery, white woman, and hear a word
From a land where the women even without bread are poets:

He comes BIA: to strengthen
with drum-beats
with horns of eerie sweetness
and with the streaming honey in his hands

bia he comes to freshen
with life=color
and with a long vine

to redden: *bia*
with serpent=life
that ripples and reaches
and tenses

I redden
my self *bia*
you redden

you become red
you grow vivid inside-and-out

bia takes on earth-power
serpent=life
nerve=life loose in the world

we kiss we caress
sexually we know
esthetically we know

you join in knowing
you plant joy
you nourish individual roots

they redden man-and-woman if both be free
they redden dark-and-light freely
they redden all, if all be free

BIA: *to redden*

to allow a thing to be born
to travel from open town to opening town
with chant and festival and drum
to-be-and-to-know the inward wreathing
color and line
I say wait for the next arrival
If you call a thing it comes
renewed
in
human
touch

*bia Let those who seek the hunter find the hunter
Let those who see love=freedom join ways*

I am learning
Let me succeed
Let those who seek the serpent touch the serpent

I am listening
Let me understand.

TEMPO RUMBA

"We Are Reborn"

Who is it speaks to me among the dancers?
It is the god Dámbálla
riding fast
 riding far
 riding all the way from Africa

Dance the colors of life and I shall watch
Dance the deep unfathomable night sky
Darker than purple, darker than dark black
Dance the white beads of the sun and stars
Paler than pale amid the shadow=worlds

Who is it touches me among the dancers?
It is the god Dámbálla
he who is so tall
 with long fingers
 and the five-beat

Dance the gold of honey, the green=gold
Of the gods' strong names one of them is so strong
That if I say it the whole world disappears from view
"Aidō-Husū - - - - -"
"I-speak-in-my-own-voice-and-I-am-understood"

Who is it reaches down among the dancers?
It is the god Dámbálla
the great traveler
 rainbow rider
 dark=bright

Dance the blue of thunder for seven days it will storm
With wild and terrible rage like that of the newly born
Dance the brass blade which carries the serpent on both sides
And whose candidate comes forth from the dark shrine alone
— Softly, softly, it is only your father

BA BA LU

Who is it holds the serpent by the neck?
It is the god Dámbállá
stranger on the shore
riding fast
riding without fear

Dance the red color of the three-day madness
(There is a bird who when she sings her child does not die)
A child, a child does not quarrel with its mother

MA MA LU

But if I cut the bird's throat and the blood runs
Over and down?

Blood cries for blood
I am your child says the drop of blood on the stair
I am your dear child says the red place on the floor
I am your own dear child says the dark place in the bed
A child, a child does not need to fear its mother

BA BA LU

MA MA LU

Sweep the house and all about it
For a friend comes from afar
yield, keepers of the door
it is the god Dámbállá
who rides here

It is He
The dark traveler
with the rainbow between his knees
bright horseman on the shore
and the birth=cord long liana

Wild-grape vine free
Holding-us-together
serpent leaping in his hand
he is near
he is quite near

Living hand hold my hand!

A cry is heard)

Gésú - - - - -

Gésú=

Dámbállá

DAMBALLA LU

FIVE LYRICS

African Violet

tender leaves, full of life's fluid
light=red blossom
whatever delicate is given to this hand
whatever needs the morning sun
and succulent springs to drink
and warm nights
give grace to touch
give quiet breath
give conscious flesh
give tender mind

Light red

let me cut your leaf
listen to things sometimes rather than beings
or wait for you to double and part

African darkness, yield midnight art
let him come forth at last to the place of seeing
figure cut from a tree
silver-eyed
conscious of death
carved by the lash
his warm thoughts
frozen in hard rivers
I hate to see that evening sun
go down in this child's untouching land
Blossom of red light
let our touch be renewed.

The White Cyclamen

the palest flower
keeps red stems
downy as an infant's ear
or the sunny side of a pear
and her petals, even in the white
light of noon
give back glow
give live vein
in the hush
of a loving mind.

Who tends

her has loveliness all year long
This is a good plant, and strong
I see him standing above her

His hands unsteady yet ready to love her
his face still green with self reddening a bit;
he trembles but touches her, with lucky wit
parts the flowers to see red stems
heavy and lush
his own vein
grows heavy to know
her scentless swoon
his face reflects her softness day and night
she has him in her snare
She draws him near
and he comes
each day truer, a tightening drum.

Woman And Man

this way
that way
where is the way

Let it come to you like rain on house=roof,
beating, like drums to the dancers,
the tight red skin of a drum, the
plucked string of a harp

the flute
holding a stop
be always there like the rainbeat
the light tapping on taut skin
to the dark female nerve
be the flute=bird
in me

in you
by true touch
I feel a sharp swerve
to my song, male and taut
I am there like the rainbeat
holding a stop
I suit
your bright red skein of inward muscles,
these I draw
streaming, like dancers to the drums
let it come to you like rain on the roof
there is the way
that way
This way

Dark=Bright

what a way to look at the morning
what a day
when the rainbow of the brain
flashes red rays
of interior sunrise all scarlet
in the sun's gaze
the ghostly flowers wake
Thirsty calling, take my heart and slake
your mouth all day long
here is black bread and strong
crimson wine

Take the experienced one, bear him forth out of mind
 You farthest god, make me more delicate . . .
 but this altar of morning says nothing is offered yet
 What does he care for wine whose staff is free
 or for bread who tastes of flowers
 or for any praise
 or mortal shade who is dark=bright
 forever Stranger slay
 our death and raise the murdered flesh of love
 O rainbeat ray
 of darkness yet arrayed with radiant morning.

Story from the Old Country

In a quiet place let us learn.

"Bā-Oulē"—these are not merely letters, as some have claimed:

Beloved son, Once upon a time

There was a queen whose people fled the enemy;

A nameless tribe, poor in war,

They came to a deep river

They could not cross

They felt the enemy's spear

They felt his arrow,

Rich only in songs

And images,

they wept.

From the center of weeping an ashy priest crept,

"Send a little boy

Weighted with heavy fear

And his mother's sorrow

And his sisters' loss

Into the deep river."

None would give, although the fierce shore

Bled; at last the queen lifted her own four-year-old gently

And offered him to the waters; Once-upon-a-time

They say, a river parted and our people were named:

"Bā-Oulē!" the queen cried *We-Are-Reborn.*

THE RITUAL CUTS



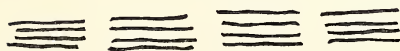
("there-one-sees-place") The first cuts are placed over the bridge of the nose and beneath the eyes.



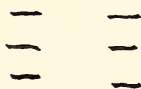
("rain-wet-straw") Straw, signifying hair. The long lines are made near the hair to emphasize its beauty; following them are two very fine cuts called "head-word."



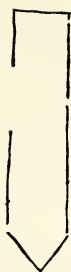
("you-see" or "kiss me") It is here, on the left cheek, that a man kisses a girl.



("the cuts that, at parting, cause the man to turn and look back") This series is marked on the third vertebra of the spine.



("neck-good-to-touch") When a man embraces a woman he caresses these scars.



("loins-place-cicatrizations" or "pass-over") The choice of this design rests with the individual. E. N. Sargent chooses "the sword."



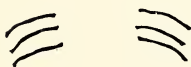
("push me") A series of nine rows of nine horizontal cuts, placed on the inside of each thigh.



("water-drink-milk") An hourglass design, placed on the left hand.



This design is placed under the navel, and is often a representation of a lizard or some other animal.



("shoulder-cuts")



The last design is placed between the breasts, and often takes the form of a series of links or of straight lines radiating from a central point. "Children of a hunter, who are poor."

The preceding material is to be found in Volume One of Melville J. Herskovits' definitive study, *The Dahomey*, J. J. Augustin, Publisher. Glückstadt, Hamburg and New York.

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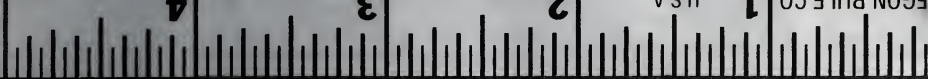
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